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## PRESS RELATIONS FOR MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

*What are the major problems of municipal press relations? What steps can the official take to improve the dissemination of local government news to the public? How can friction be avoided?*

Is the press a modern counterpart of Biblical sackcloth and ashes to be worn by the city official as penitence for entering public service? One city manager says: "There is no problem that gives the municipal official more headaches or encourages incipient ulcers more readily than the one posed by his relations with the press."<sup>1</sup>

A political scientist warns city managers: "Another pitfall is to accept an appointment in a city having a newspaper editor or publisher who is militantly opposed to the manager plan. In many cities the newspaper editor, more than any other person, can make or break you. The bitter, unrelenting opposition of an editor leading a daily war dance in his news columns for the manager's scalp, and for abandonment of the manager plan, is difficult to survive."<sup>2</sup>

This report examines the complex problem of city government-press relations. Its purpose is to delineate principal areas of friction and thereby suggest ways to avoid them. The report also presents practices which have proven sound.

### The Easy Answer?

A detached observer might ask, "Why does friction exist? After all, are not both the press and government institutions which serve the public? Are they not both orientated toward the same goal — a better community?"

Many newsmen and officials respect each other's purposes and functions. But while "understanding each other" sounds good, in most cases it is little more than a platitude. Government and the press each has its distinctive role in American life. Seldom are these roles entirely compatible. One writer dealing with the problem expressed it this way: "The press has a primary responsibility to the public, not to officials, just as officials have a primary responsibility to the public, not the press."<sup>3</sup>

The press considers itself both the watchdog of public interest and the public's representative where public business is conducted. This is an historic role that frequently brings newsmen to sword's point with officials who have the legal responsibility for the conduct of public business. The manager who mentioned his "incipient ulcers" captured the issue when he said: "Without dealing in extremes, one can see again that certain areas of conflict and difficulty grow out of the nature of the thing, no matter how much good will is expended on both sides."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>William A. Sommers. "Kick Against the Goad," *National Civic Review*, January 1959, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Charles D. Goff. "Pitfalls City Managers Should Avoid," *Public Management*, January 1959, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>James C. MacDonald. *Press Relations for Local Officials*. (Ann Arbor: Bureau of Government, Institute of Public Administration, University of Michigan, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Sommers, *op. cit.*, p. 18.



### The Press and Public Relations

For those who believe that a "good press" is all that is necessary for good public relations, a warning is due. Press relations is only that part of public relations in which the mass media is involved.

This point needs some illustration. Newspapers, television, and radio are not the only means by which the public hears about city government. Annual and special reports issued directly to the public are used by some cities to present information that the editor would not normally find interesting or important enough to put in the paper. Some cities make special efforts to inform people of forthcoming governmental actions which will directly affect them. Each time a person enters city hall or meets a city employee he obtains an impression of city government. Prompt, courteous, efficient, and thoughtful service by employees is the best public relations builder there is. Nothing does more to create a favorable image of city government. Woe to the administration cursed with employees who muddy that image by sending citizens home from city hall with the feeling they've gotten the "run-around."

This report cannot encompass the broad subject of public relations, but two things should be remembered:

1. In the municipal context, sound public relations must be based on effective performance — performance satisfying more than a modicum of the community's needs and the public's desires.
2. Good performance is not enough. The people must know about it.

It is in the carrying out of the second that press relations plays so vital a part. Rule out, for the moment, the editor doing the "war dance," the one continually after the scalp of the manager because he doesn't like the council-manager plan. There is a very real difference between his type of complaint and that which all too often hits the front page. Here are some examples:

Take the public works director who orders his street paving crews into the busiest block of Main Street on the Tuesday before Easter, at the height of the second most important shopping season of the year. Take the street cleaning workmen who fail to take down temporary "no parking" signs when the sweeper breaks down, intending to come back the next day; motorists are confused and many have to pay parking fines. Take the official who orders a detour for trucks past a school without telling neighborhood mothers that it is temporary and that extra police are on hand to enforce speed limits. In each case, protests hit the papers.

Some impulsive citizen complaints will always get into print. But the official who is repeatedly lambasted by *the public* through the press should ask himself why people are not willing to bring their gripes first to city hall. Most likely the answer is that those complaining do not expect to get satisfaction there. The administrator who is concerned about the public's opinion of city government would do well to review his entire public relations effort, not just blame his misery on the press. In short, the administrator must be aware of the public relations aspects of all municipal activities, no matter how small they may seem.

*The public official lives his life in a fishbowl.* He is under scrutiny at all times. People are wont to equate city government with the character and integrity of its elected and appointed officials. This means that the administrator — indeed, every city employee — must be concerned about his own personal public relations.

Oftentimes it is the press which serves as the only eyes through which the public views the administrator's public life. And there's the rub. The public official who is hypersensitive to criticism is in the wrong field. Nowhere does a hostile press have such a fertile field for mischief as when there is an innate suspicion of the people in city hall. Conversely, sentiment is more likely to be on the side of city hall when the people in it are respected — even if the newspaper's management is motivated in its opposition only by an honest difference of opinion on municipal policy.

Complete harmony with the press is an impossible goal. But if it is assumed that relations with the press are likely to be sometimes trying, it then is possible to see more clearly the positive steps that may be taken, the objectives toward which municipal press relations should be directed.



### The Press Today

Before attempting to define these goals, however, a look at the mass media today is in order. It is difficult to generalize, because of the diverse nature of the press, radio, and television news-gathering activities. Nor would generalization be worth while if carried too far, since administrators must work within their own local press situation. Yet, there are trends in the industry that affect, to greater or less degree, the local situation.

Statistics. Newspaper publishing has always been a business marked by rapid fluctuations. Since the early days of the depression, particularly, there has been a steady decline in the number of daily newspapers in the United States. More than two dozen have succumbed to the industry's peculiar economic attrition in the past 10 years, a period of generally high economic prosperity.

Despite the decline in number of daily newspapers, total circulation has increased some 16 million (to 58 millions) in the past 20 years, even though the newspaper must compete with newer media for the reader's time. A survey of newspapers in 39 cities, comparing 1959 data with those of 1939, showed that the average size of the papers had increased from 27 pages to 40 pages.<sup>5</sup>

The demise of newspapers, in certain situations, has had a market effect toward concentration of ownership. Not only are there fewer daily newspapers, but in many cities with more than one publication, all are under a single ownership. Almost 95 per cent of the 1,459 cities with newspapers have no competitive ownership, and 15 states are without a single city with competition in the printed medium.<sup>6</sup> Some of the great national chains have contracted their holdings, but a number of strong regional chains have emerged.

Nondaily papers have grown in number and quality. Long a fixture of rural communities or well-defined neighborhoods in very large urban areas, the weeklies, semiweeklies, and triweeklies lately have sprung up in expanding suburban areas. In terms of news presentation, many are the equal of central-city dailies, recognizing of course that the smaller papers make no attempt to cover anything but local news. However, the nondaily field has been afflicted with poor products; some were started many years ago merely to supplement printing operations and have not been fully developed into real news media.

Competition. What has been the effect of the demise in the number of daily newspapers and the growth of nondailies? In general, there has been a constriction of economic competition, but competition for news remains a key feature of newspapers in most areas. To most administrators, the avid pursuit of a new angle on a story by a half-dozen reporters continues to be their hardest trial.

In metropolitan areas, the suburban community is likely to have a local nondaily. It competes with the central-city paper which sends in a reporter (to cover several suburbs) or pays a "stringer" space rates to attend meetings and to keep his ears open for major news items. Even in cities where there are two dailies under single ownership, there is often deliberate editorial department competition even though all other operations have been consolidated. This decreed competition can be as rough on the news source as that among separately owned newspapers.

Unmentioned thus far, but a real influence on the competitive atmosphere surrounding news gathering are the broadcasters. Radio and television tend to skim the cream off the top of the news. One manifestation of this has been the almost complete elimination of the newspaper "extra." A much more significant turn, due in part to the rise of news broadcasting, is the trend toward use of "background" stories by newspapers.

The electronic media are not wholly responsible. Perceptive newsmen long ago realized that the news was growing more complex. "Coverage in depth" has become the goal of many editors. Scientific developments since 1940 and the federal government in Washington are two types of stories that cannot be told without some special emphasis on the *how* and *why*, as contrasted with *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*.

<sup>5</sup>Alvin J. Remmenga. "Has the Press Lost Influence in Local Affairs?" *Nieman Reports*, October, 1959, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>*Newsweek*, November 23, 1959, p. 65.



Some newsmen recognize that local government also requires the kind of expository reporting that goes to the heart of today's problems. This trend shows every sign of continuing — it is a subject that comes up at just about every regional and national meeting of editors and publishers. Of course, it will demand more time of those people in government who can supply the needed information.

One other point needs to be made about newspapers. Almost without exception, editorial departments are locally managed and, even where the paper is part of a chain, newspapers speak with a local voice on local matters. Some editorials are bold and to the point; others are timid and wishy-washy. But in either case the editorial voice is not far away. The editorial writer's ivory tower — if he has built one — can be scaled by anyone seeking the ear that goes with the voice.

The Power of the Press. An official of a medium sized city once explained his view of press influence this way: "Newspapers can hurt you more when they are against you than they can help when they are for you." Yet this official's view is probably superficial. How can one assess the effect of a forward-looking newspaper? There does seem to be more than a casual relationship between a press aggressively sympathetic to better schools, urban renewal, and industrial development and the existence of better schools, better homes, more jobs.

A recent effort to sound out opinion on the question, "Has the press lost influence in local affairs?" resulted in the conclusion that it has declined since 1940.<sup>7</sup> In this poll, some 309 persons were questioned, 80 of whom were municipal officials and the rest newspaper editors, political scientists, and "readers" of newspapers. It is perhaps significant that the 80 municipal officials were less sure of this decline than the group as a whole. They believed that newspapers exert substantial influence, with the degree of influence varying with the circumstances of a given situation.

Interests of the Newspaper. It is probably fair to say that the newspaper as a rule tends to take a position closely allied with that of the downtown community in matters affecting the downtown community. The newspaper may be either a leader or a follower. One newspaper, for example, may voice the businessman's view that more parking space is downtown's salvation; another may be far ahead of the business community in promoting the comprehensive planning necessary to cope with current problems.

Increasingly, newsmen — reporters and editors alike — are called upon to report and comment on abstract concepts, such as those involved in the planning process. It is becoming more and more difficult for them to confine themselves to simple blacks and whites. The newspaper's own future is inextricably wrapped up in the future of the community as a whole. When it oversimplifies the tangled issues of zoning, subdivision control, urban renewal, industrial development, and the like, it does so against its own long-term interests.

Unfortunately, many still do. Take the case of the owner of a small weekly who sees two college students, during their summer vacation, taking a traffic survey for the local planning commission. To him the sight of the two youths sitting on chairs at an intersection clicking off movements on a traffic counter is "the biggest boondoggle since WPA days." To him no traffic survey is needed, only more parking. His answer is to throw out the parking meters to which he has a personal aversion. In that town, it is the merchants who were the prime movers in a too-long delayed comprehensive planning program.

Another example may indicate the type of thinking spreading among newspaper management. Only five years ago a newspaper editor in a city of 60,000 persons wrote a telling one-sentence editorial which many persons believed accurately reflected community sentiment. It said: "Let's have no more codes."

But now that editor is dead. Downtown is hard-hit by new suburban shopping center competition. Rapid industrial and population expansion has brought new problems. The city has felt some of the effects of a shift of many people to the suburbs. Metropolitan problems have overtaken the community. No longer does the newspaper dismiss government lightly. It has actively promoted intermunicipal cooperation. It worked for creation of a regional planning agency. It hires its own engineers and specialists to review technical ordinances and, in most cases recently, has supported strengthened codes.

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<sup>7</sup>Remmenga, *op. cit.*, p. 8.



As a rule, newspapers have too big a stake in their communities to take a consistently negative attitude toward city government, no matter what their orientation vis-a-vis local political leaders.

### The Press and Administrators

Some editors have objected vigorously to the council-manager plan. Some have been personally hostile to individual managers. But as a rule, newspapers tend to support efforts to improve city hall efficiency.

Managers tend to be well-regarded by the press. A recent survey taken by *Editor & Publisher*,<sup>8</sup> a leading trade publication, indicates that in the opinion of a small sample of city hall reporters, managers may be characterized this way: they know what they are talking about, they give straight answers, and they tend to be objective. Several reporters complained that managers are a might too cautious in talking to reporters in matters where they believe council should be consulted, and like other city officials they sometimes fail to volunteer information. But all in all, managers showed up pretty well.

This points up the inescapable role of the professional administrator in the local government structure. Not only is he in day-to-day charge of city activities, but he is also charged with carrying out the policies set by the elected governing body, including the important function of informing the public about those policies and their ramifications. It is natural that he will be the person usually sought out by reporters.

This being the case, the administrator should resist the temptation to make a statement on every subject raised by the press. The greatest difficulty in determining whether or not to comment is recognizing those borderline cases where the subject lies between the forbidden realm of politics and the administrator's clear-cut jurisdiction. In the long run, the administrator's reputation with the press will be built on three things — accuracy, completeness, and pertinency.

Over a period of time the administrator and the reporter may achieve mutual respect for the job each is doing. This is perhaps an ideal objective. But even when the ideal is achieved, the administrator should know that this relationship must have no "strings" attached, that the reporter and his editors will always feel free to oppose, to object, to criticize.

The administrator may develop some of the typical complaints about newsmen: They tend to be superficial, ignoring the important for the sensational. The reporter is not well-grounded in government, particularly local government. His news stories give a distorted picture.

The administrator should recognize, however, that the reporter is called upon to explain, to extract the significant from the mass of information given to him, and to do so in such a way that people will read what he has written. Many administrators complain that not all of the material they present to councilmen is read by the councilmen. The general public probably would not read it either, unless the material is put into a form they can absorb in the amount of time they devote to their newspaper.

The administrator must also recognize that the good reporter acquires a "habit of doubt" that will continually place a strain on their relationship. A reporter's cynicism can be a burden but it is one of the occupational afflictions which the news source must live with.

Goals of Press Relations. Once having decided to live with his local newsmen and broadcasters, the administrator can then think about what he can do to improve the flow of news to the public. These goals are suggested:

First of all, he will determine that the information given to reporters is accurate, complete, and pertinent. He should work to improve, to the extent it is possible for a news source to do so, the mass media coverage of local government news.

Second, he will strive to obtain a balanced, fair consideration of municipal problems by those who comment on those problems in newspaper editorial columns. In so doing he will be careful not to transgress in any way upon the traditional editorial function of the press.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Irwin. "City Managers Make Better News Sources Than Mayors," *Editor and Publisher*, January 16, 1960, p. 11.



Third, he will avoid many of those incidents which typically bring criticism from the press about the way city hall handles its press relations.

### Know Thy Newspaper

The first commandment of successful press relations is: Know Thy Newspaper. Here are some of the things city officials should know about newspapers in their cities.

What Are the Newspaper's Mechanical Requirements? In this group would be such things as copy and photographic deadlines and edition times. The administrator or the mayor should not release a complicated report an hour before the newspaper goes to press, nor will they give the weekly newspaper an elaborate diagram the morning it goes to press.

Copy deadlines are important because the earlier the reporter has his information the more likely he will be to study it, prepare his story with care, and seek answers to the questions still in his mind. Administrators should try to see reporters regularly well in advance of the copy deadline.

Photographs present different problems. Even with new, more rapid engraving processes, no picture normally can be scheduled for same-day printing within about two hours of press time. Some small dailies and many weeklies do not own their own photo-processing and engraving equipment. They may need a day or two to have cuts made elsewhere.

Edition times are important. It is often possible to give information to a reporter in advance of a meeting when the meeting comes just prior to edition times, with the understanding that it will not appear until a specified time. Avoid at all costs telling what will happen at a meeting for use before the meeting starts, when the newspaper writes of the events in the past tense. In one city, a group which met at 3:00 p.m. regularly read in the noon edition of actions taken at their meeting. The meeting rarely went the way the newspaper predicted (in past tense). The story the next day rarely back tracked and it was always buried near the classified ads because it was "old news."

How Has the Newspaper Defined its Function? The administrator should note a number of nonmechanical aspects of newspapers.

1. Intensity of Coverage. How much space is given to local news, specifically local government news? The big city daily may confine itself to major developments, to those elements of controversy that make headlines. A weekly, on the other hand, may print the complete texts of all sorts of documents issued by local officials. But even the smallest paper will be affected by its own policies about the amount of coverage it will give local news.

Contrast the Burlington, Vermont, *Free Press* with any number of larger suburban newspapers in the New York City area. The *Free Press* circulates throughout two-thirds of the state. It is its readers' prime source of national and international news. A high percentage of its space goes for nonlocal news; and as a result, there is a premium on conciseness in all its stories. In the New York metropolitan area, the suburban newspapers are local papers. With circulations several times that of the Vermont paper, their role is one that does not duplicate the job done by the New York City metropolitan newspapers. Were it not for the fact that they are loaded with news of Bergen or Morris or Westchester Counties, they would not exist.

The extreme example of intense local coverage is the typical weekly. It does not present anything but local news. It often is eager to run complete texts of statements and reports of local officials as a service to their readers, even though a relatively few persons read such texts.

What this means is this: Where the newspaper has decided to give intense coverage to local government, considerable attention will be given to routine. It will list building permits that have been issued. It will list purchases by city council, the small as well as the large. It will more likely be interested in the way things are done, not just the results.

2. Area of Coverage. What people does the newspaper reach? In a city with two newspapers, one may have a larger circulation within the city, while the second may be stronger in the suburbs



or nearby rural areas. If the story is one on annexation, of interest primarily to suburban residents, it may reach more affected people by appearing first in the second newspaper. In a city where there is a large commuter group using mass transportation, morning newspapers will reach this group. Where commutation is by car, this group usually will read the evening paper.

3. News Policies. One newspaper in a city of 125,000 has a reputation for covering city council meetings with a telephone call to the city clerk after the meetings are over. This is an exception; most newspapers have a much more active interest in local government. Newspapers have their sacred cows and pet hates which affect the content of the news columns, but the shibboleth, "news is what the editor decides to put into the paper" is not the pat answer it appears. The editor's freedom of choice is not so wide as it might appear. He cannot ignore budgets, tax rates, zoning cases, public hearings, and the like. As a rule, local government news will stand up well in the competition for available space in any given day's newspaper.

However, the news source must recognize the type of news that reporters and the editors want, news that meets the first two tests of *interest* and *importance*.

4. Energy Devoted to Newsgathering. One manager has complained that in his town the city hall reporter's job is a training post for people who are constantly being shifted elsewhere as soon as they display reportorial ability. This is probably not the rule. It should be recognized, however, that one reporter may have a particular competence that permits him to handle a given story with greater insight than reporters of other papers, particularly where the matter is a complex one.

What Are the Newspaper's Special Requirements? The administrator should be aware of what the editors and reporters want in the way of facts. One editor has this obsession: Every story about fires in rural areas had to give, in feet, the length of hose unreeled by firemen. Only rarely does the fact add anything significant to the story, but it has to be in.

Most demands for facts are based on sounder grounds, although it is surprising how many of these cause conflict between city officials and newsmen. Most frequently these occur in connection with the police blotter. Another is the frequent practice of listing the pay of all persons added to the city payroll. The administrator should avoid clashes on this type of demand because they are rarely worth the fuss they cause. He should remember the goldfish bowl.

Sunday newspapers have special needs. Frequently Sunday papers have small full-time staffs working on feature stories several days in advance of publication. Here there is special meaning to the rule that news sources do not tip off other reporters about what their competitors are working on.

There will be times when the death of a national figure, a plane crash, the sinking of a ship, a flood, or a major fire will crowd out a lot of otherwise acceptable news. If that day has been picked to appeal to the public to conserve water or to hurry and pay their taxes or to announce plans for a new swimming pool, the story may find its way to a small news hole on the comic page. Just accept it as the toss of the dice, and try to think of a new angle that will win greater prominence a few days later.

This leads to consideration of timing, perhaps the most vital single element of public relations. Ever wonder why White House and Congressional reports find their way into the news broadcasts of Sunday evening and the Monday morning papers? Sunday is usually an unproductive news day. By turning reports and announcements over to reporters on Friday or Saturday, the White House and Congressmen achieve two things. They give the reporters an opportunity to spend some time with a document before writing about it, and they gain the advantage of a story made prominent by the fact that very little else has happened. The city official can learn much from Washington in this respect.

The number of pages in any given day's issue depends upon the volume of advertising for that day. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday morning editions are usually fatter than those of Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday. A fatter paper usually means more space for news too. There may be a greater chance of a newspaper running the complete text of a report on Thursday rather than on Tuesday. Saturday editions tend to be the smallest of the week, and generally have the lowest circulation of any day of the week.



"Gentlemen of the Press"

The chief administrator should know the people who run the newspapers. As far as the administrator is concerned, the Fourth Estate is divided into four parts: reporter, photographer, editor, and publisher. Among broadcasters the division may not be so clear. There may be a reporter, announcer, cameraman, and owner. Broadcasters have been reluctant to editorialize on the day's events, although the networks and some individual stations have been moving in that direction.

Reporters. In most cities, city hall will be covered by just one person. He must have a good knowledge of the city, its people, and its politics. He may have served a previous tour as general assignment or police reporter.

It is likely that he is a college graduate and has had some courses in government in college. It is also quite possible that he will be a woman, since the fashion, food, and family pages are no longer the only fate of female journalists.

Generally speaking, the smaller the newspaper the less experienced will be the reporter at the time he is assigned to city hall. Smaller newspapers tend to be more afflicted with personnel turnover than larger ones. The reduced work week for reporters may mean that an inexperienced man is sent to city hall when the regular man has a day off, or when he is on vacation. As a result of the combination of these circumstances, the administrator may find that the reporter he is dealing with that day has little background on current problems. He must be cautious with his confidences until he can evaluate the reporter's sense of responsibility and his judgment.

Photographers. Since he is rarely at city hall on a full-time basis, little need be said here of the photographer. He has special problems and requirements which are discussed later in this report. Important things to remember, however, in relations with the photographer are the necessity to keep to the scheduled time (he will have other assignments waiting for him) and to avoid crowding many people into group pictures. Often his city desk has told him it won't use a "gang shot" with more than two or three persons in it.

Editors. Titles as such tend to lose meaning in the editor category. First is the supervisor of reporters and copy readers. He is almost always called the *city editor*. Then there is the man in over-all charge of the editorial department's operation. He may be called *editor* or *managing editor*. Third is the editorial writer or writers. The chief editorial writer may also be known as *editor*, although *editorial page editor* is more common. Some newspapers have editorial boards of three or more people, including the publisher, managing and city editors, and other top newsroom people, any of whom may write editorials. Oftentimes, reporters are encouraged to submit editorials on subjects related to their "beats."

People in the editor category have been, most likely, with the paper for some time, although movement of editorial executives between papers in a chain is fairly common. As a rule, therefore, these men know their community well. Sometimes they can become chairbound and lose perspective because they erect an ivory tower for themselves. But many are aware of the need for direct contact with news sources. Administrators should welcome editorial writers who stop in at city hall, or who call to check facts. If the city official feels welcome at the newspaper, he should stop in to chat with editors — preferably after the paper has been put to bed.

Publishers. Publishers are the owners or the representative of owners. *Most consider their newspapers as more than property.* Some devote their prime effort in the business operations, but most have an avid interest in editorial department activities. Top political leaders in the community are likely to be on speaking terms with the publisher. Sometimes top administrators are too. The publisher is one of those civic leaders with whom officials should exchange ideas and opinions frequently and informally.

Personnel on Small Papers. The four categories of newspaper personnel tend to have little meaning on small newspapers. The reporter may also be the photographer. The editor may cover city hall and write editorials. The publisher may turn printer on publication day.

Working with Newsmen. Don't hesitate to talk over the problems of press relations with reporters and editors. The administrator cannot always accomodate them, particularly where there



is competition for the news, but some general agreement on ground rules is highly desirable. For example, some reporters do not want to be party to off-the-record statements, since this binds them even if they pick up the same information elsewhere. Others can safely become privy to innermost thoughts. In either case, there should never be misunderstanding about shared confidences.

Respect a newsman's energy. Don't tell one reporter what another has asked. When dealing with reporters, give straight answers and volunteer information where possible. Develop a nose for news. Suggest feature story ideas; the reporter may appreciate it. Maintain free access to the news. Keep the door open to reporters. Thank him when he comes to check a rumor, but don't ask to okay his stories. Don't try to find out, "Who wrote that editorial?" or "Who told you that?" (He won't tell you). Don't quarrel with a newsman, but let him know in a nice way when he's gone astray. Don't play favorites among the press corps.

Don't forget official position. The only thing the administrator can comment about as a private citizen is Afghanistan, and don't be too sure of that. When he gets up to speak, he speaks as Mr. City Official. When he beats his wife, he is Mr. City Official beating his wife.

Avoid, "no comment," but recognize that there are times when it is out of order to say anything. If the newspapers insist upon quoting the "no comment," don't say anything.

Don't complain to the editor about the reporter. Settle things with the reporter. In any case, the editor will probably back up his reporter. Don't hesitate to point out major inaccuracies and to ask for published clarification. But be sure the mistake is only the fault of the reporter and not a misunderstanding caused by faulty communications. Don't fret and demand retractions on minor points.

Remember that an astute city hall reporter can be a prime source of information. Talk to him informally as often as time permits. Occasionally ask him, "What do you think?" He rarely gets an opportunity to comment publicly, and it may prove valuable to be able to test the reaction of a person who has both an intimate knowledge of city hall and the detached viewpoint of a private citizen. He is probably the only individual in city hall who has neither a political nor an economic interest in the operations, and may be only truly unbiased observer in the municipal building.

Keep in mind that it is just as easy — and just as dangerous — to build an ivory tower at city hall as it is at the newspaper building.

### The First Link

The administrator, despite his training, knows he must continually educate himself anew about government. So does a good reporter. Like the administrator the reporter has a limited amount of time in which to educate himself. It is much easier to learn as he goes along. Usually this means that the administrator serves as the instructor.

Take urban renewal as an example. To write intelligently about urban renewal the reporter needs to know more than how to write down something that someone says. Procedural problems, at least during the first two or three years, are the meat of his stories. He must learn to live with, and understand, such phrases as "workable program," "capital grant reservation," and "220 financing." If the public is to understand, the reporter must understand.

Barriers to Communication. Perhaps the biggest barrier to communication with the public is jargon. A public relations expert has cautioned:

Every business tends to develop a technical jargon of its own — a kind of verbal shorthand that is very useful in communicating with other people in the same business. But more frequently, it's Greek to the public and may lead to misunderstanding. Unfortunately, it is human nature for people to mistrust what they cannot understand. Therefore, I urge you to make a study of your letters and other communications with your publics and carefully avoid technical jawbreakers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Clifford B. Reeves. "The Public Relations Aspect of Office Management," *American Business*, August, 1959, p. 16.



The administrator, in his reports and announcements, uses hundreds of words to tell elected officials and the public about what is going on in city hall. To be effective, these words must be understood. The increased specialization of municipal government has resulted in the development of professions peculiar to it. Traffic engineers, city planners, and city managers quickly fall into the use of terms readily understandable to each other. The traffic engineer has his "time cycle," the planner has his "land-use study," and the manager has his "span of control."

Since this point is so important, an illustration may help. The example is taken from another profession — the school administrator. The following paragraphs were actually published (except for the fictionalization of the community) in a weekly newspaper. Evidently they came verbatim from a school release. The illustration is used because it is not likely that municipal administrators will be versed in educational jargon.

Approximately 750 Hometown High School freshmen and juniors took the Iowa tests of education development at the high school last month.

The tests which determine the students' basic knowledge, intellectual skills, understanding, and the ability to use what has been learned, covered nine areas of social studies background, natural sciences background, correctness of expression, quantitative thinking, reading of natural and social sciences and literature, general vocabulary, and uses of sources of information.

The results of this test compare the students with other students all over the country, as well as the students of Hometown High School. The comparison is shown on the profile card which is scored in percentiles with 50 per cent the national average, and dotted line as Hometown's average. Students will receive these cards at either the end of this semester or the beginning of next semester.

These tests are probably the most important of all standardized tests taken in high school.

As in practically all cases where the newspaper does not protect the jargonist by making sense of what he says, this story causes the reader to ask more questions than it answers — if he reads it at all. Perhaps the newspaper felt it had to run the story because the press release said it was "important." Few newspapers will do the same on such weak authority. In fact, public officials are better off when the newspapers ignore such junk. But this illustration can serve as a warning. Many administrators think that because they obtain a lot of space or air time for city government news the public is informed. This can be the worse kind of self-deception. Unless the stories are presented so that people can understand them, they might as well not be in the paper or on the air.

The first step then is to think in terms of public understanding when giving news to the reporter.

Elimination of meaningless jargon is only the first element of news content that should receive attention at the initial stage. Others are listed below:

1. Be Complete. The five W's (*who, what, why, when, and where*) are still a necessary part of every story. Press conferences, news releases, interviews of public officials must deal with these basic elements — with a lot of *how* thrown in, particularly where finances are involved.

2. Be Clear. This is the wider problem of which jargon is so much a part. The press is often accused of oversimplification, sometimes with reason. But are real efforts made to present news to the press with a proper balance of simplicity and complexity? Too often a report is dumped in the reporter's lap with the comment, "Go to it boys." If he has two hours to read 90 pages, he has two choices: to select at random and run the risk of distortion, or to ask a city official what it means. If the second alternative is not satisfying, he then must resort to the first. Every complex report should be accompanied by a brief statement listing the major considerations, recommendations, or conclusions. This should be complete enough to stand by itself as the basis for a news story. The most common opportunity for a statement of this sort is the administrator's budget message.

Don't be vague. Vagueness creates an opportunity for the reader or listener to condition the statement by what he knows or thinks he knows. Let's take the medical profession for an illustration this time. A favorite line of physicians is, "He's doing as well as could be expected." One reader may pick up the implications of improvement, another the pessimism generated by the restraining "as could be expected." Vagueness creates suspicion among reporters.



3. Use Illustrations. Use effective and meaningful illustrations. Financial costs of a new sewer system or school often are put into perspective by saying, "It will cost less than a pack of cigarettes a day." (This particular illustration has been effective, but it may be reaching the point of diminishing returns. The voter, over a period of years, may find himself committed to a carton a day.) The technique of allowing people to measure the impact on their own budget is a good one. Rather than use the "average" assessment to show the effect of a tax increase, why not use several typical assessments at \$3,000, \$5,000, \$7,500, and \$10,000? Practically all assessments will be either above or below the "average." Would it not be even better to prepare a table so that any property owner could compute his own tax increase? Opportunities for such illustrations are there. Use them. It will improve the story that appears in the newspaper.

4. Be Concise. Conciseness is a virtue easily abused. It is not incompatible with completeness. To be on the safe side, an administrator tends to turn everything over to the press and let the reporter struggle through a mass of data. He does not want to be accused of holding back information. Again the problem is to find a happy medium. The safest bet is again the summary. Give the reporter a long version with the facts and figures so that he may study it at his leisure. Give him a short version he can write his story about.

5. Avoid "Two-Dollar Words." Don't let city hall get a reputation for gobbledygook. City hall people could benefit from this advice given to newsmen:

"By proper training the reporter can eliminate from his news vocabulary such expressions as 'termination of the illumination' in favor of 'turn out the lights.' He can train himself to write 'because' instead of 'because of the fact that' and 'consensus' instead of 'consensus of opinion.'"<sup>10</sup>

6. Don't Use Dead Words. The administrator who uses lively words will find his words being quoted in the press. The test will be whether they make the point effectively. Therefore, use active words rather than passive ones, and don't use an adjective where a verb can be used. Don't hesitate to reframe sentences to get life into them. Make the qualifications that count, but don't be too concerned with hedging to cover all possible results. Avoid "haveitis" as in "We should have liked to have known what we were to do." Municipal reports do not *have* to be dull, the evidence of many of them to the contrary.

7. Don't Be Dull. One of the most practical ways that newspapers are of assistance to city officials is to print "reminders." These include changes in trash collection routes or hours, warnings of deadline dates for payment of taxes or renewal of licenses, and the like. Such notices can be dull, and the newspaper is quite justified in burying such a notice on page 22 when only a small part of the public is involved.

Why not use some imagination? Find a news "peg" to hang the story on. The tax deadline might suggest some study of the pattern of tax delinquency. Are the largest taxpayers prompt? How much tax is never collected, and why? What laws require the city to maintain tax records that will never be used? How does the city attorney handle tax lien cases? It can't be done every year, but such an occasion might be the perfect time to suggest a feature on the assessor or tax collector or some other person connected with the tax collection process.

8. Remember That People Make News. Think in terms of people where possible. The people's business should be explained in terms of the people affected. This is the key to understanding what is news. New automatic bookkeeping equipment means that city employees will be able to do more work, faster. But the real story is what it will mean to the public — perhaps they will get their tax bills on January 15, rather than February 1, thus giving them a few extra days to scrape together the money before the May 1 delinquency date. Perhaps it will mean customers will get their bill on an IBM card that should not be folded. Think of the external news "angles" of internal administrative improvements.

In summation, a textbook writer has suggested to reporters that they lower their "fog index," (built-in meaninglessness) by following several points in the preparation of their stories.<sup>11</sup> They apply equally well to news sources:

<sup>10</sup> John Paul Jones, *The Modern Reporter's Handbook* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1949), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



1. Write news leads that talk. Write the news like you would tell it.
2. Write short leads. Keep them 30 words, or below.
3. Divide the lead into two sentences if your thoughts begin to ramble. (The *New York Times* admonishes its reporters to remember, "One thought, one sentence.")
4. Use simple, declarative sentences. Make sentences average 20 words.
5. Use simple words instead of long, obscure terms.
6. Avoid "fancy" writing, technical words and phrases, and foreign terms.
7. Use concrete terms rather than general terms.
8. Use verbs for description instead of adjectives.
9. Tell the news in terms of people.
10. Draw the reader a word picture.

In addition, the administrator should remember that in presenting background he should avoid becoming argumentative or propagandizing. Keep in mind this distinction:

"What you see or verify is news; what you know is background; what you feel is opinion."

### Contact With the Press

The reporter gathers his news in a number of ways. He is a spectator at meetings. He interviews officials. He attends press conferences. He receives a press release or report which he must convert to a news story. In each of these situations the administrator can take steps to achieve better communication at the time a news story starts on its way to the public.

Meetings. What participants say and what they do at meetings is the basis for most news stories developed at gatherings of councilmen or the many administrative boards in local government. The veteran reporter will bring to the meeting some perspective; most items of business he will be familiar with, because of prior events. Occasionally, however, a different type of item will be on the agenda. Councilmen may have discussed it with the administrator in private before the meeting. The administrator should be sure, however, that the reporter obtains a clear picture as a result of the meeting. This is particularly true where the reporter faces an early deadline which limits interview time after the meeting.

Interviews. The top-level administrator will be interviewed frequently. Most interviews tend to be informal and hardly seem like interviews at all. The reporter comes in and asks, "What's new?" The administrator runs down a list of items, and that's that.

But in matters of major importance, a more formal pattern will emerge. This pattern has three phases. During the first, the administrator will outline the elements of the story, with the reporter asking general questions as he explores for points to develop for his story. During the second phase, the reporter will direct more specific questions in an attempt to fill out the contours of the story — to put meat on the bare bones of what has been volunteered.

Beware of the reporter who heads for his typewriter at this point, for the third phase is very important. Now that he has the story, the reporter should review the substance of what he has learned, and he should test on you the conclusions which have taken shape in his mind. "As I understand it, this means..." he should be saying.

Don't tell him, "Read me what you have taken down." It is better to draw him out by asking what he thinks about what you've told him. He may demonstrate a misleading assumption. This gives you an opportunity to restate the situation with the proper emphasis. Misunderstandings can arise in any conversation; precise communication in an interview is vital. The ideal interview ends with both participants clear about the information given. Obviously, plenty of time for an unhurried interview helps bring this about.



It is wise to let the reporter set the pace of the interview. Don't be so rabid on the points you want to make that you choke off his tangential lines of inquiry. Above all, don't treat the reporter as if he were an unimportant part of the process, as a stenographer who is merely putting down on paper what you are saying. Don't tell him, "You'll want to mention this." He'll make up his own mind.

Press Conferences. Press conferences provide a formalized vehicle for confronting a number of newsmen. They are rarely necessary in small cities, but sometimes media competition and press demands on executive time make press conferences a major outlet for city government news. In some cities, press conferences are held on a regularly scheduled basis. For example, Downey, California, holds such meetings twice a week — a rare practice in a city of only 90,000. But they are necessary because five daily newspapers regularly staff city hall in this community near Los Angeles.

There are two patterns in press conferences. One is to merely let the reporters ask questions. One used more frequently is for the officials to make announcements (usually written down so that reporters may carry them back to their newspaper), followed by questions relating to the announcements. Then the conference is thrown open to questions initiated by the reporters.

Administrators should be aware of some of the newsmen's limitations on press conferences. When both morning and evening papers are involved, it is probably better to alternate the conferences so that each gets the "break" in turn. The reporters from the papers not getting the "break" will be reluctant to ask questions that possibly will open up new story angles since his competitors will benefit, or a radio bulletin is certain to take the edge off the story their questions generate. *The press conference should never become a substitute for direct access to the administrator.*

Newspaper-television competition gives all signs of becoming a major headache to officials who are caught in the middle. Within recent months several incidents point this up. Several national figures were criticized by television executives for holding separate conferences for newspapers and television. Later, the three major TV networks announced that if they were not permitted to film the newspaper press conference, they would not film a separate one. There the matter stands.

There have been incidents in which TV camera and sound men have been "sabotaged" by reporters standing in front of camera lenses or making distracting noises near microphones. Newspaper reporters claim that the television reporters don't have sufficient background to ask significant questions and therefore depend on newspaper reporters to ask the questions that elicit the news-making statements from officials. TV replies that its reporters will not be considered "second class citizens."

It is impossible to say how the issue will be resolved. Quite apart from the feud, the apparatus involved in television filming — lights, cameras, and microphones — would seem to be sufficient reason to conduct separate conferences.

Press Releases. Large cities make a practice of issuing press releases. It is rarely necessary in small cities. The basic objection of newsmen to press releases is that they are self-serving and they cannot be interviewed. However, it never hurts to have some of the facts, particularly financial and technical data, down in writing for distribution to the press. Generally speaking, the less formal these releases the better.

Some cities also have press officers, under various titles. This can be a rough position for the person holding it. Newspapers, on principle, probably will not see the need for a public relations man standing between them and city officials. The practice has some advantages, however. It recognizes the need for a formal information program. A well-qualified person can give attention to the problems of converting jargon into understandable words. A press officer who knows what is going on can help round up information requested by a reporter.

However, if the press officer becomes a person who must "clear" all comments, if officials merely refer reporters to the press officer for comment, if only the elements beneficial to the political and administrative leaders of the city government are volunteered, then it is likely that the press officer will have difficulty with the press. While it may be beneficial to consolidate informational activities, again the less formal the better.



Reports. A city hall reporter spends a lot of his time with documents — budgets, reports, and the like. He also listens to the administrator submit oral reports to council. Reports should always be prepared with the thought in mind that they will wind up in the next edition of the local newspaper. Reports should be free of jargon, be complete and concise, and follow all of the other rules.

They should give the bad with the good; omission of unsavory conditions may invite a news story on the omissions. Data used in the reports should be valid. For example, continued underestimation of fire losses by the fire department will eventually show up in underwriter data on claims paid, or in revision of local insurance rates. Statistics should be meaningful. Some statistics invite questions; be prepared to answer them.

From a reporter's viewpoint, a report should be a logical up-dating of earlier reports on the subject. Some effort should be made at comparing the old with the new, although this is less vital on short-interval reports. Interim reports should be clearly marked so that there is no mistake that the conclusions may be revised later. Above all, keep the press up to date. Imagine the surprise of the reporter who, a year ago, ran a map of the urban renewal area but now finds that, with a little change here and another there, the area's boundaries have been substantially altered. People now in the demolition area believe they have escaped the bulldozer.

From time to time, particularly after a series of developments, newspapers run what is called a "situation" story. This frequently appears in Sunday editions and brings together into one story the major points of a continuing story that has run for several days. Administrators may encourage this type of article by submitting their own situation reports to the city councils.

#### Facilities for the Press

Does city hall have a press room? Does it need one? Probably not in most cases. However, there are a few facilities that a city can provide to assist newsmen.

In the council chamber, for example, there should be a press table or chairs for reporters near the city clerk. Ideally, reporters should be seated where they can see the faces of all councilmen and the private citizens attending the meeting. They must be able to hear. An official who mumbles is bound to get in trouble with the press some day.

Sitting near the clerk, the reporter will be able to take a look at documents, such as ordinances, during "dead" periods in the meeting. This can save his time, if he does not have to chase around after the meeting. Where lengthy night sessions are the rule, this passing of documents may mean that the participants will get home sooner too.

Where there is no press room, the reporter should have access to a telephone that he can use at least in semiprivacy. In most cases, reporters are free to use any telephone, but under certain circumstances it might be better to make formal provisions. For example, in the police station it might be unwise for reporters to use the desk sergeant's phone.

It may also be necessary to set up a system under which the reporter is to receive messages from his city editor. It is better to have the telephone operator or the manager's secretary — or some other person the reporter sees every day — take the message than to have the editor call all of the city offices hunting the reporter.

Photographers. Newspaper and television photographers usually have free access to city hall activities. At times, their equipment can disrupt proceedings, as at a council meeting or public hearing. These disruptions can be minimized through ground rules mutually arrived at. Feel free to discuss these problems with the photographer and the editors.

Photographic coverage of the police headquarters and major fires poses special problems. Some police departments turn over "mug" shots of prisoners to the press. Similarly, it is a common practice for the police to "tip" the press when a prisoner is to be removed so that they can get a picture. Probably the best course here is to do it all the time or not at all. Anything that smacks of special treatment for a particular prisoner will receive rough comment from the press. Some cities issue passes to photographers to get them through police lines at a fire.



Broadcasting. Both radio and television coverage of meetings require installation of sound equipment, and, in the case of the latter, bright lights. If a meeting is to be aired, it may require rules of procedure that make sure everyone talks into a microphone. These technical problems should be discussed with broadcasters in advance, so that disturbance can be kept to a minimum.

Another problem involved in television is the appearance of public officials. The need for clear, concise statements is nowhere more evident than on television. General questions need specific answers. The problem of editorial selection is critical when the city official has a 20 second film strip to comment on vital public issues. It is probably better to write, or at least think out, a brief prepared statement than to talk off the top of your head.

The test of whether the city should take steps to improve facilities for the press is the facility's contribution to accurate news gathering and speedy transmittal to the newspaper. Never should facilities be subject to capricious withdrawal in a moment of official irritation. A city gains little in a personal argument between the official and the newspaper or broadcasting management.

### Some Press Problems

Policies involving the press are best formulated *when there is no heat on city hall*. It is almost impossible, for example, to work out a solution to the problem of how much access the reporter will have to the police blotter if the question arises in connection with charges that a local bigwig involved in an accident received special treatment.

Perhaps the three most sensitive areas, in this regard, are those of police, health department, and hospital records. In some cases, the mere reporting of events can have harmful effects on an individual. The publication of juveniles' names in police cases is one of these questions still in the middle of controversy. But these "hot" issues should not obscure the many places in which it is possible to sit down with the press and work out acceptable solutions. For example, the press may feel that birth records at a city hospital are public records, and they feel free to print births. And yet most papers would be willing to withhold publication of births of children who the attending physician says have little chance of survival.

Contact with City Employees. While employees should be cautioned not to talk loosely about things they know nothing about, little good can come from efforts to channel all news through the manager or department heads. It is practically impossible to seal off city employees from the press anyway. The wise reporter will always check rumor with responsible authorities. He will learn those persons whose tips are reliable and those which must be avoided. Municipal officials should realize that things get around, and before long the newspapers will hear of them. An aggressive newspaper will make sure it hears.

"The Gang's All Here." One of the most futile efforts an official can make is to try to bottle up information when it involves a substantial number of people. Whenever more than a few, a very few, people are in on anything, it's better to make public announcements with one of the group serving as spokesman or clearinghouse for information. Don't hold back. It will do no good anyway.

"You'll Have a Better Story Tomorrow." Don't ask a reporter to keep something off the record when he is likely to obtain it from another source. You may be tempted to say, "I'll have it all for you later, if you hold off." Don't make the request unless you are absolutely sure that you have control over the situation. Many reporters refuse to be a party to "off-the-record" discussions because they have been burned by competitors' publication of information they had been sitting on. Many newspapermen have said on occasions like this, "No wonder reporters become cynical."

Leaks and Trial Balloons. Should "inside dope" be leaked to the press on condition that no names be used? This is a risky business for the administrator. It is hard to see the circumstances in which it would be better to leak a story than present it through the normal means.

A story that the city is considering a course of action may make a good story, even if the person involved is not yet willing to be identified with it. But if, after the story is published, this person denies everything, trial balloons can try the city-press relationship. After putting the reporter



out on a limb, the official has sawed it off. Again, there are normally few occasions on which the administrator should desire to get information to the press without being identified as the source.

National Pickle Week. For some reason, those directing campaigns and promotions for everything from Arbor Day to Zoo Week think it helps to obtain publicity by obtaining the mayor's signature on a proclamation. Actually, the mayor's name and picture probably are in the paper so often that most newspapers do very little with these stories unless the campaign has a wide or unusual public interest.

Here is a technique for dealing with this problem. It has the advantage of handling the request, without the city assuming responsibility for coercing the press to run the publicity.

1. The organization submits a tentative draft of the proclamation and any press release to be used with the mayor's name. If it wants photographic coverage of the signing, the organization makes arrangements with the newspaper. If the newspaper agrees, the mayor poses.

2. The mayor revises the proclamation, has it retyped on official city stationary, and then signs it.

3. The revised proclamation and press release are returned *to the organization* for whatever use it sees fit. It then must contact the news media concerning publication.

The same general procedure may be followed in setting up television or broadcasting coverage. The official cooperates to the fullest extent possible short of direct contact with the broadcaster.

These admonitions should not be broadened to include legitimate city ceremonial occasions. Let the press know directly that there may be a picture possibility, as in the presentation of suggestion awards. Perhaps they won't all be covered, but the percentage of coverage probably will be high.

The Reporter's Library. The administrator should make enough copies. The reporter will want to build up a file of material he can refer to to obtain background on his stories. He should have an up-to-date city street map; another showing principal water and mains; a third showing the major elements of the sewage system — including drainage districts; a fourth showing police districts and fire department areas of first response coverage. He should have a complete set of current planning documents including the latest master plan, zoning map and ordinance, land-use maps, and planning study reports. He should have a file of the principal city ordinances and the city charter, if there is one.

If this isn't enough for him to read in his spare time, let him keep a file of city council minutes — important if he is to track back a current controversy to its unobtrusive beginning. (The newspaper's morgue will contain only those things that were important enough to publish the first time around.) The city hall reporter will compile his own list of officials, but sometimes the city does the same, as in a roster of civil defense sector chiefs. Give him a copy. Other reference material would include the city's annual budget, special reports of department heads, engineering studies, consultant's reports, and highway and traffic studies.

Why give a copy to the press? Because the city official will be called upon less to draw from his own memory for specific data, and the reporter will be able to ask more pertinent questions after a brief refresher of the materials he has on hand.

"Available Jones." This should be the nickname of all administrators. Despite the use of press conferences and press releases, reporters need to have access to the newsmakers, and not just during working hours. The administrator should never have an unlisted home telephone number. He may be routed out of bed by a reporter calling to check on local effects of state legislation enacted that evening in the state capital. Just try to impress upon the reporter that the call should be important enough to justify getting the official out of bed.

Each reporter should have private access to the administrator, free from the competition, if at all possible. Where are you to find time to do this? After all, you have to do some work for the city too. This is not an easy question to answer. It is probably best to fit in a certain amount of time to meet reporters regularly. Not more than 30 minutes would be needed each time, and



usually less. For afternoon papers, the time should be set early in the morning, before the bulk of the day's appointments. Talk with morning paper reporters, unhurried, by meeting them at the time city hall closes.

Postgraduate Work. Even the political science major who now bats out copy for the local newspaper will need to do some post graduate work. He should know where the city's public work's facilities are. He should know a little about the chemistry of water works and sewage plant operations. The administrator should take the reporter on a tour when he gets a chance. He should make the chance. The reporter usually will be able to get a feature story to justify his trip.

Why should the reporter be so informed? Because he needs to recognize that these are complicated procedures. If he knows about what is being done to prevent flaking of iron oxide inside water mains, isolated complaints about rusty water are not likely to make big headlines. If he understands that the local water source frequently contains phenol oil, he may be more sympathetic when the water tastes bad. But don't try to educate him after the complaints. It is better for him to know now, rather than after an emergency arises and he has to learn in a 10-minute interview just before his deadline.

The Big Story. One more area in which advanced preparation is needed is what might be called the big story — the major fire, the flood, the earthquake, the epidemic. The big problems in such a disaster are finding out what happened, finding out what hasn't happened, and finding out what's going to happen. This is one time when the city will be expected to provide a steady stream of information that separates fact from fiction and rumor.

Take the case of the paratyphoid epidemic that hit an eastern city several years ago. At no time during the first few days did any city official say what people should do or not do. The newspapers got hundreds of calls. In this case, a dairy seemed to be associated with the first primary victims. "Why are the milkmen walking around?" "Why are they still selling milk?" "Should we wear masks?" "Shall I send my children to school?" These were just some of the hundreds of questions asked the newspaper. And because no one among the city's leaders took the initiative to inform the public, much that was not true got into the papers.

When disaster strikes, the need for quick action to inform is almost as important as rescue efforts. Here again, preparation is the key. Civil defense's informational services should receive attention before the need for them is urgent. When disaster strikes, the city should act.

Competition. When there is more than one reporter covering city hall the problem arises as to which is to get the "break" on a story, as with press conferences. There may be a tendency to spread the news around, one paper getting a story one day, another the next.

Perhaps the best plan, though, is to release the news promptly, without regard for the "breaks." In the normal course of events in a city of any size, all daily papers will get their share of major news stories. After a newsworthy meeting, make an immediate announcement. As soon as a decision is reached or a program started, this information should go to reporters. If followed religiously, this practice may not satisfy the editors every day, but the administrator will gain a reputation for fairness and forthrightness.

The problem becomes more complicated when one or more of the newspapers or stations is outside the city. Because the local paper probably reaches more of your citizens, it may be best to time the news breaks for the local paper. This becomes more complicated, of course, when the local paper is a weekly and nearby dailies send reporters into the city. Here the answer probably is to be frank with the daily papers, but when working on major projects (announcement of the budget or construction of a new sewage treatment plant, for example) plan the announcement for release near the weekly's deadline.

### The Disinterested Press

There is no easy answer to the problem of the press that doesn't cover local government. A small suburban government may be ignored by the central city press — unless of course it goes out of its way to announce that meetings will be held in secret, with no reporters present.



What can the manager in this small town do about this? Probably the best bet is to regularly prepare press releases. At first, prepare a lot. After a while you will see what the newspaper is likely to use. Try calling the newspaper with information. Find out where the merchant's advertise. That paper is likely to be read in the community, even if published elsewhere.

Regular newsletters and informational bulletins are sometimes sent directly to the homes of residents. This is a good practice where there is no newspaper. Above all, newsletters should be informative and interesting — not just statistics or announcements, rather items about and affecting people.

Newsletters in communities with newspapers pose a somewhat different problem. In some large cities the manager's newsletter has limited circulation — city councilmen, citizens known to be interested in city hall activities, and the press. Such newsletters often contain the seeds of stories which the newspapers can develop. However, there may be occasions on which city officials will think about using a newsletter as a direct news medium. This presents the temptation to hold back from reporters choice items in order to make the newsletter more interesting to the public. This is not good for effective press relations. There is the further possibility that the newsletter may become just another piece of "junk mail" which floods the home these days and thus loses its effectiveness.

The community without a newspaper or with a hometown weekly may find that the neighboring city's daily wants coverage, but doesn't want to send a reporter out to meetings. The daily tries to cover the city by telephone. Most likely the manager or city clerk will be called after meetings for information about the meetings. As in the case where press releases are issued or where the administrator calls the newspaper, there is the danger that the administrator will be in the middle between a desire to hold off on a particular matter and the reporter's expectation that the information given about the meeting will include every major item of business discussed at the meeting. There is no easy answer for this problem, although administrators should remember, "Nothing will cause more bad feeling, suspicion, and friction than sitting on an important development once you have agreed to volunteer information in the absence of direct coverage."<sup>12</sup>

The shotgun is loaded, too, when the administrator is called upon to prepare news for the in-town local paper. There is nothing wrong with articles appearing under the by-line of the city manager — a number of papers run weekly columns by city managers. However, the source of the stories should always be clearly identified, and one-sided propaganda should be avoided. In no case should the administrator put on the reporter's hat and attempt to write what purports to be an objective news article about himself and the city government. It will soon be found out by the public. The practice can do nothing but hurt government, the official, and the newspaper involved.

### The Ugly American

All too often government is pictured as a "behind closed doors" operation, the people in government as shady characters working on the fringe of the public spotlight. The picture painted is not a pretty one.

Much has been said on both sides. The press contends in its "Right to Know" campaign that government secrecy is more prevalent today than ever before. When the official says that all considerations cannot receive proper evaluation in the glare of publicity, the newsman asks, "Why not?"

This is a point on which the press is particularly sensitive, and local government most vulnerable. Most state laws — some of them enacted in the past few years — have clarified the "ground rules," but in all but a few states closed sessions are legal if no formal actions are taken.

Several courses of action have been used with success. In some cities, reporters sit in on off-the-record sessions of council and administrators. There is a clear understanding that the reporters are there to obtain background information, and that the comments of participants are not

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 13.



binding. Another practice is that recently introduced by the Metropolitan Commission of Dade County, Florida. Weekly "briefing" sessions are held at which policy-makers meet administrators in the presence of the press with nothing off the record. There are no speeches, and "grandstanding" is prohibited. The county commissioners have the chance to question one another and their administrative officers. So do representatives of the press. No decisions are reached at these sessions.

In large measure the practices in any given city are largely those developed over the years. But probably the best practices are those combining some freedom from the pressure of publicity for the officials and a maximum flow of early information to the public.

The public official should try to limit private meetings in which decisions are reached, and which make the public, legal meeting a formality that means little. This is a responsibility of councilmen as well as administrators, of course.

Municipal agencies also should avoid meeting in private *when they don't have to*. Take the case of a suburban township zoning board of adjustment. After hearing arguments at public hearings, the board would adjourn into a private room, reach its decision, come out, and announce that it would be made public two days later. Board members delayed because they felt they should report first to the commissioner heading the zoning committee of council. The commissioner didn't give a darn, but the board's action made it appear that he was deciding each case. Such misguided people who will not stand on their own two feet hurt local government.

Habit is an affliction that affects the press too. The reporter gets so used to sitting outside the closed doors that he doesn't ask if he can come in. For many years, it had been the practice of a park commission — legally a separate entity but largely supported with public funds — to hold its meetings in private. It was opened to the press after a reporter asked if he could sit in. All he had to do was agree that he would not publish the names of individuals who had received mortgage loans from the private estate funds which originally financed the park's operations exclusively. All other financial data were unrestricted.

It is possible — although not certain — that if efforts are made to keep all private sessions of all agencies to a minimum, the press will be willing to see the need for privacy on some questions. It may be that the problem is not one of executive sessions but abuse of executive sessions. The official who adopts a "papa knows best" attitude is headed for real trouble.

It has been observed:<sup>13</sup>

In the long run, information about local government in particular is going to get out into the community in some form. It's far better to get it on the record and get it straight than otherwise. Actually the instances when a matter must be kept in confidence are quite limited. A few come to mind.

1. Negotiations for purchases of lands, building, or other property in which advance information would bid up prices.
2. Negotiations for top personnel whose present positions would be jeopardized by such information, particularly if they are not offered or do not take the job.
3. Investigations of complaints about personal conduct of officials or employees before evidence is established or formal proceedings against the individuals are undertaken.

A fourth might be negotiations to bring a new industry to town. With so many communities competing for industry, premature revelation may upset a deal.

Usually there is a point at which the press would be free to publish the information. In the case of the industrial negotiations, it might well be when the company acquires an option on land. The newspaper would not be bound to wait for a formal announcement from the company involved or from the city. It would just have to wait until some affirmative action was taken.

Try to define these breaking points with the reporters, the editors, and the publisher.

<sup>13</sup> MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 37.



### Conclusions

Press relations are a continuing problem for administrators who should also recognize that their city has public relations needs not limited to the press.

The press is the most important medium for communicating information to the public. This is a process that brings the administrator into contact with the reporter and the photographer, and, ideally, with the editor and the publisher. The administrator must know his newspaper and the people who run it.

While there is no simple solution to the frictions that are an inherent part of the city government-press relationship, there are advantages in anticipating them before they become red-hot issues. Where possible, the needs of the press in terms of information and facilities should be met.

The reporter is the first link in the chain that carries information to the public. Like the administrator's, his work is a continuing process of self-education. Oftentimes the administrator can serve as an instructor. Such instruction is vital because government is becoming more complex each year.

There are a number of barriers to communication between the administrator and the reporter. One is excessive use of jargon that creeps into the newspaper and makes governmental news unintelligible to the public. The administrator may start the informational ball rolling by avoiding jargon, by being complete, concise, clear, by using illustrations and examples, by avoiding "two-dollar words," by using lively words, by remembering that people make news.

He should meet regularly with the press. Where there is competition, press conferences, news releases, and more formal presentations may be necessary. He should be available to reporters as much as possible. When being interviewed he should take positive steps to see that the interview has succeeded in getting a properly balanced, accurate story to the reporter. Official reports should be prepared in the knowledge that eventually they will be subjects of news stories.

Broadcasters have their own particular problems in covering public events. These problems should be the subject of municipal policy arrived at after consultation with the broadcasters. Facilities furnished to the press should be determined by the degree to which they help present city news quickly and accurately.

Secrecy, or charges of it, is the prime press-city hall problem. From a philosophical standpoint the press takes an absolute position; in practice there are a *few* areas in which the press agrees that certain kinds of news is not ready for publication. What is needed is a better delineation of these areas.

A city hall where reporters are free to contact all city employees, where news is not held back, where free discussion is held in public many more times than it is held in private — this is the city hall at which the battle for the "Right To Know" will not be fought.

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